Celestia Susannah Parrish (1853 - 1918): Pioneering Psychologist, Native Virginian, and "Georgia's Greatest Woman"

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This biographical sketch of C. S. Parrish originated as an invited presentation for the Key Barkley Symposium on the History of Psychology at the meeting of the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology, Atlanta, GA, March 1997. The symposium that year focused on early women members of the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology of which C. S. Parrish was a Charter Member. Subsequently, it was revised and expanded to "publish" on my University of Georgia website which is when it was copyrighted. The most recent revision, one which added a considerable amount of new material, was done in conjunction with an invitation to speak about C. S. Parrish at Randolph-Macon Woman's College on March 16, 2005. Note that this may be updated from time to time as new material is has been obtained, for example, since last revision noted below.

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Abstract

Celestia Susannah Parrish was born September 12, 1853, the daughter of a plantation owner in Pittsylvania County, Virginia. At age 10, she was orphaned together with a younger brother and sister. By age 15, Parrish became her and her siblings' sole provider as a teacher in the small country school in her home community. Her life story was one of dedication to education. Initially, there was her struggle to obtain her own education and ultimately there was her commitment to education that resulted in significant contributions in the states of Virginia and Georgia. In Virginia, after earning an Ph.B. degree in psychology under E. B. Titchener's supervision and in 1894, she established at Randolph Macon Woman's College the first psychological laboratory in the southeastern United States. Her accomplishments in psychology gained her a listing among the 22 women in the first edition of *American Men of Science*. In Georgia, she joined the faculty of the State Normal School in Athens, GA in 1902. In 1911, she became a Supervisor of State Schools with responsibility for all the public schools in the 48 northernmost counties and relocated her residence to Clayton, GA. By the time of her death, September 7, 1918, her accomplishments were such that the Georgia Legislature adjourned in Atlanta to attend her funeral in Clayton, a distance of approximately 125 miles. As suggested by the Georgia State Superintendent of Schools, Parrish's grave monument bears the epitaph, "Georgia's Greatest Woman."

Celestia Parrish's Education

Parrish's education began at age five in a private school on her father's plantation. After she was orphaned at age 10, she lived the next five years with an uncle, who disapproved of education for girls, and two aunts who Parrish described as being "...hysterical invalids much given to 'uneasiness.'" She continued with self-

education by reading all the books in her aunts' library, and from 1865-1867 she was allowed to attend a private school in Callands, Virginia. To be able to attend the school in Callands, she had to walk 2.5 miles over a "rough mountain road." Parrish summarized her early formal, educational experiences as follows.

My school education had been worse than desultory. The best teacher I had did not know mathematics beyond arithmetic, and she met all her difficulties in that with a "key." We had memorized text-books in composition without written exercises, in science without performing or seeing a single experiment, in history without any thought of a possible bearing upon the life about us, and had done nothing of real worth....I had accomplished something unaided. I knew when I was 12 years old that my language was incorrect, and had corrected it by the rules in Bullion's grammar. **(Parrish, 1925, p. 1)**

At age 15, Parrish's guardian uncle died, and she learned that the Parrish estate had been sacrificed to pay a security debt. Her aunts refused to take further responsibility for her and her brother and sister, and to support herself and her siblings, she became a teacher in the county public school in Swansonville, Virginia (Larew, 1942, p. 342). Parrish described her beginning experiences as a teacher as utter failures, but owing to the need to make as much money as she could, she persevered. As she expressed it, she persisted "with the desperation of a drowning woman" (Parrish, 1925, p. 2). Parrish went on to say:

At last I had an awakening. The new "birth" came when I read "Page's Theory and Practice of Teaching." I had not known that a book had ever been written on teaching, and when this fell into my hands I sat all night to read it. In the gray dawn I knelt over the book and promised the Lord to be a better teacher. The experience was indeed a baptism of the Holy Spirit, for from that time I devoted the best of my energies to my profession and lost no opportunity for professional as well as personal culture. **(Parrish, 1925, p. 2)**

Her reputation as a teacher grew over the years, 1871-1875, and an opportunity for advancement came in the form of an offer to move from the county school to teach in a larger public school in Danville, VA. She taught in the Danville public schools 1876-1884. She was also supporting her younger sister who was now attending the Roanoke Female College (known today as Averett College), and Parrish saw this as an opportunity to advance her own education as well. After her teaching hours were over, she began her personal studies which often caused her to miss the college dinner hour and go hungry. She was graduated from the Roanoke Female College in 1878.

Parrish's next educational opportunity was to attend the first "summer normal" ever held in Virginia (1880). This was a six-weeks course for public school teachers at the state university. She wrote:

The libraries and laboratories were revelations to me. From occasional lectures by the

university professors, I obtained glimpses of great fields of knowledge whose names had, previously, meant nothing to me. (Parrish, 1925, p. 3)

For "self-culture," as she expressed it, she took private classes in music voice and in elocution "trying hard to attain a good speaking voice and a pleasant manner of speaking" (Parrish, 1945, p. 3). She also noted that she had been awkward as a child, and her aunts' "continual sarcasm only made me more self conscious and, therefore, the more awkward" (Parrish, 1925, p. 3). To correct this, she took private lessons in calisthenics, and she reported that after a year or two, she became "a less awkward woman."

Over the next few years (1884-1892), Parrish became first a student and after six months a teacher in the newly established State Normal School of Virginia where she was given charge of the mathematics department. Parrish began to plan for a year's study at "...a great university....but calamity came again, the path of duty was plain, and I worked on." (Parrish, 1925, p. 3). Parrish did not explain the "calamity" in her autobiographical article, but it may have been the death of her half-brother. Rosenberry (1934) wrote that Parrish assumed "part of the expense" of her brother's five children's maintenance, although Rosenberry did not say when this occurred. Possibly related to the preceding, although there is a significant time discrepancy *vis à vis* Parrish's reference to "calamity," Strickland (1971) wrote, "About the time of her move to Georgia she adopted a young girl and took over the care of two nephews, sons of her brother." (p. 19) In any case, at long last and at age 38, Parrish was finally able to spend the academic year, 1890-1891, at the University of Michigan where she specialized in mathematics and astronomy. That experience gave her the desire to earn a college degree, but, as she noted, her own state's university was not yet open to women.

In 1893, Parrish was offered the chair in mathematics at the newly established Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia. Her appointment also included responsibility for the philosophical department, including pedagogy and psychology. Knowing nothing of modern psychology, she enrolled in the summer session at Cornell and stayed on between the end of the summer session at Cornell and the beginning of the fall session at Randolph-Macon to work under the direction of "the professor of psychology." *The* professor of psychology was Edward Bradford Titchener, an Englishmen and a doctoral student of Wilhelm Wundt; many consider Wundt to have been the founder of experimental psychology.

After Parrish returned to her duties at Randolph-Macon, her desire to learn more psychology led her to ask Titchener for correspondence work. After his initial refusal, she wrote to him:

You must help me. A man who sits down to the rich feasts which are spread before you has no right to deny a few crumbs to a poor starveling like me. (Parrish,1925, p. 3)

She won Titchener over, and later she would write that he gave her "... *the most generous assistance then, and afterwards became my very kind friend.*" (Parrish, 1925, p. 3)

Based on Parrish's summer at Cornell, her year at Michigan, and other credits gained here and she determined that she had two obstacles remaining to earn a Cornell degree. One was a requirement in Latin where her background was minimal, and the other was the requirement of a year's residency at Cornell. She tackled Latin mostly on her own, but she also paid the teacher for special tutoring and she joined a class in which her classmates were mostly Latin teachers and graduate students. In eight weeks, she earned a grade of 80% on an examination that normally was used to assess six months of college Latin.

Regarding the residency requirement, Parrish could only take one semester away from Randolph-Macon, but she took an overload of course work at Cornell and gained other credits by examination. She thought that these, together with her previous summer session at Cornell, would be all she needed. However, she learned that the summer session at Cornell did not apply. She pled her case with Cornell's President. He said he was willing to accept her appeal but that she would have to make her case to every member of the Cornell faculty. He advised her to tell each faculty member what she had told him and to do it in the same way. Later, in October and back at Randolph-Macon, she received a telegram. She said her fingers trembled so much that she could not open it at first. Finally, she did and it read "Petition Granted." She had earned her bachelor's degree from Cornell, and it was awarded in 1896. Upon reading the previously mentioned telegram," she said:

***I went into hysterics for the first time in my life, and when the first flush of triumph was over, was obliged to succumb and was ill for several weeks.* (Parrish, 1925, p. 4)**

Furumoto and Scarborough (1986) in an article published in American Psychologist, provided some results of their examination of the "first American women in psychology," concentrating on the 22 women whose credentials qualified them to appear in the first edition of *American Men of Science* (1906). As may be seen in their Table 1, Furumoto and Scarborough reported that Parrish "had no graduate study." Seemingly contradictory to this and as may be seen with her name as author of an article published in *American Journal of Psychology* (Parrish, 1896-97) "A.B., A.M." are listed after her name. Parrish attended the University of Chicago, which included work with John Dewey, during the summers of 1897, 1898, and 1899 (Bell, 1973; Strickland, 1934); this suggests that she may have had an opportunity to earn an A. M. degree. However, most sources show her Cornell degree as Ph.B. rather than A.B., including biographical sources published during her lifetime where it is reasonable to assume that she provided the information (e.g., *American Men of Science*, 1906, and *Woman's Who's Who in America*, 1914), and I have seen no other source showing the A.M. degree. Possibly, a copy editor for the *American Journal of Psychology* was mistaken about her degrees.

Parrish's Professional Career

Having begun teaching at the age of 15, much of Parrish's professional career coincided with her own education. To review that briefly, her first teaching job was in the county public school in Swansonville, VA. Then she taught at the public high school and at Roanoke Female College in Danville, VA. Next she taught at the State Normal School of Virginia before moving in 1893 to the newly established Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, VA.

Parrish remained at Randolph-Macon from 1893 until January or February 1902 (Cornelius, 1951, mentioned both monthly dates). Most sources reporting a date confirm that Parrish came Athens, Georgia, in 1902 where she had accepted a faculty position at the State Normal School of Georgia in Athens, GA. One exception, which appears to have been in error, was Sells (1923) *History of the State Normal School, Athens, Georgia.* Sells reported that Parrish came to Athens in 1901. Parrish was also hired to teach "Child Psychology" (Zeigler, 1949). In 1911, Parrish resigned from the State Normal School to accept one of the positions of State Supervisor of Schools in Georgia (more on this below), a position she held until her death in 1918.

Accomplishments in Psychology

Parrish's work with Titchener resulted in a publication titled, "The Cutaneous Estimation of Open and Filled Space" that appeared in the January 1895 issue of *The American Journal of Psychology* (Parrish, 1895). Among her seven experimental subjects were Professor and Mrs. Titchener. Her association with Titchener's laboratory work also resulted in her desire to establish a laboratory as an adjunct to teaching at Randolph-Macon Women's College. She did this in 1894 with 25 hard won dollars from the beleaguered president of Randolph-Macon. Rowe and Murray (1979) described this as "the first psychology laboratory in the south," a claim that was confirmed by Hilgard (1987). Parrish published a second article in the *American Journal of Psychology* in 1896-97, and a footnote in the article cited experiments in progress at Randolph-Macon. In 1938, the newly expanded and refurbished "Parrish Laboratories of Psychology" were dedicated at Randolph-Macon Woman's College; this event and some of architectural details and descriptions of some of the laboratory's equipment were described in an article by Helen Peak (1939) in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*.

Zeigler (1949) reported that Parrish established a well equipped laboratory at the Normal School in Athens in 1902 with a gift from George Peabody (apparently of $3,500.00). That same year a "psychological laboratory for teaching" had been established at the University of Georgia with a gift from Oscar Strauss (one of the founders of Macy's department stores) where Titchener's *Experimental Psychology* was the textbook. It has not been determined whether Parrish had a hand in that,

although it is known that Parrish taught in summer school at the University of Georgia several times during her tenure at the State Normal School.

Zeigler reported that Parrish taught "Child Psychology" for several summers at the University of Georgia using both observational and experimental methods. Zeigler (1949) did not specify which summers Parrish taught at the University of Georgia. However, the present author has determined from a search (done on March 11, 2005, of University of Georgia *Bulletins, Catalogs*, etc. housed in the University of Georgia's Hargrett Library) that Parrish was listed as teaching "Child Study: Psychology" in the summer session, 1903, and she taught "Child Study: Experimental Psychology" in summer 1904. She was not listed among the other teachers for the summer sessions of 1905 and 1906, and no listing for anyone was found for the summer of 1907. Parrish was again listed as teaching in each of the summers 1908-1911. It may be of some interest to note that she was teaching at the University of Georgia before women were allowed to enroll as students. Women were not admitted formally until 1911, despite the General Assembly of Georgia passing legislation in 1889 calling for the admission of women to all branches of the University, except the School of Technology and the Medical School. Women were first allowed to enroll at UGA in 1911 for the M.A. degree *provided the work was done only in summer school.* Finally, in 1918, the Board of Trustees passed a resolution calling for the admission of women, to take effect in 1919, as regular students in the School of Education and in the Agricultural and Mechanics School (Home Economics). Apparently the restriction to these two schools was never enforced, and women were soon being admitted to all colleges within the University to which they applied. The information in this paragraph about the admission of women to the University of Georgia was based primarily on Brooks (1956) and Dyer (1985).

As mentioned earlier, Parrish was among the 22 women in psychology who were qualified to be included in the first edition (1906) of *American Men of Science* (Furomoto & Scarborough, 1986). She was a charter member of the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology, founded in 1904, (see Report of the Secretary, 1905). Parrish presented a report at the second meeting of the Southern Society on the newly equipped psychological laboratory at the State Normal School in Athens, GA, and she reported on some of the problems under investigation.

Accomplishments as an Educator

In addition to the accomplishments already cited as a psychologist, Strickland (1971) reported that Parrish "impressed...George Foster Peabody, who provided $10,000 dollars for a building to house experimental classrooms." (p. 19) This building, formally known as Muscogee Elementary School, named for Peabody's home county in Georgia, came to be known best as the "Practice School" (the first in Georgia). Sells (1923), who appears to have been prone to error, reported that this building was completed in 1902, and Sells did not mention any role that Parrish may have played in its funding or construction. Peabody also provided funds to

Parrish to equip a psychological laboratory at the Normal School. At the Normal School, Parrish held the titles Director of the Practice School and Chair of Psychology and Pedagogy.

In 1911, Parrish resigned from the faculty of the Normal School to accept a position of State Supervisor of Schools. Her responsibilities included oversight of more than 2,400, rural schools and more than 3,800 teachers in Georgia's 48 mountainous counties (Strickland, 1971). Presumably, to be better located in terms of her new responsibilities, she built a cottage in Clayton, Georgia where she lived until her death. The conditions for education in north Georgia were very poor, and Strickland (1971) reported that "this dedicated reformer managed to visit every county annually, traveling by rail, buggy, and wagon." (p. 19). The average teacher in north Georgia had about a fourth grade education, so much of Parrish's effort was given to teaching the teachers. Strickland noted also that she conducted a "...relentless, and sometimes unpopular campaign..." to persuade local politicians and leaders to provide better financial support for the schools (Strickland, 1971, p. 19).

Ritchie (1948) wrote of Parrish as follows: [Ritchie, a member of one of the founding families of Rabun County where Clayton, GA is located, founded the Rabun Gap Industrial School in 1904. In 1927, the school merged with the Presbyterian Church-sponsored Nachoochee Institute to form the Rabun Gap Nachoochee School located on the former Industrial School's campus. Ritchie co-managed the Rabun Gap Nachoochee School until his retirement in 1939, and he almost certainly knew Parrish personally.]

Like most reformers. Miss Parrish was not altogether popular in her campaign. But she succeeded in her purpose. She had very much the mind and the manner of a man on the public platform. She was frank and even abrupt and blunt in making her points. No other woman in Georgia has waged such a radical and successful reform in education. She was no less than revolutionary. Like other great reformers, she meant to be heard, and she refused to retreat one single inch. **(Ritchie, 1948, p. 334)**

What reform was she seeking? She was mostly concerned about the futility of the old curriculum whereby all students took Latin, Greek, and mathematics rather than having a more practical education. According to Ritchie (1948), her favorite method was to attend a high school commencement and address the audience by asking first, 'how many students does your school have?' For example, the school had 200 students. She would then ask, 'How many studied Latin and Greek?' The answer would be 'all of them." Then she asked, 'why?' and the answer was 'to prepare for college.' Then she asked, 'how many are going to college?' and the answer would be 'two or three.' Then to make her point, she asked, 'What are the other 198 of your pupils going to do?'

Another example of her work as one of the State Supervisor of Schools may be seen in her report, *Survey of the Atlanta Public Schools* (Parrish, 1914). It reveals her

capacity for work and her keen eye and caring mind for the welfare of students and teachers. Her effort and attention to detail in this 30 page document are remarkable. Today, a committee of several esteemed educators plus support staff would probably ask and receive a $200,000 grant and a year's time to accomplish what Parrish did between April 16, 1914 when the Atlanta Board of Education recommended that she do the survey and May 25, 1914 when she submitted her written report. She acquired a tremendous amount of data first-hand based on an intense site-visit plan (see excerpts below). She also examined and incorporated the results of similar surveys from the Birmingham, AL, and Richmond, VA, school systems, as they were deemed to be comparable to Atlanta's at that time. The 10 topics below (and others) were discussed at the special meeting of the school board that convened on June 30, 1914 for the purpose of receiving the report. The list below is quoted from Bell's (1973, p. VI)) *Preface* to the republication of the *Survey.*

1. The reduction of the grammar school course from eight years to seven.
2. The reduction of the number of pupils in a room to 40 or 45.
3. The introduction of Domestic Science and Home Economics into the Girls' High School and as far as possible into the grammar schools.
4. The employment of a Primary Supervisor.
5. The placing of the Normal School in a Grammar School building.
6. The securing of a larger connection of the schools with the life of the city.
7. The group method of teaching as contrasted with the mass method.
8. Time limits for studies in the Grammar Schools.
9. Too much book work done in Grammar Schools.
10. The discussion of what subjects may be omitted in arithmetic and other studies.

Bell noted that one board member, Major Robert Guin, "vigorously proposed" that the board implement the recommendations. Subsequently many of the recommendations were implemented.

The following are some excerpts from Parrish's (1914) *Survey of the Atlanta Public Schools.*

Knowing that my time limit would not allow me to visit all of the city schools, I selected types, and tried to visit schools in different localities, serving different social classes, housed in different sorts of buildings, working under different community conditions, and having principals and teachers of different training and experience. The elementary schools visited were Lee, Highland Park, Ivy, Calhoun, Davis, Fraser, Walker, Exposition Mills and Howell Station. I spent, approximately, a day in each of these, except Highland Park, to which I gave only two hours, and Exposition Mills and Howell Station, both of which I visited in one day. I spent, approximately, two days in the Girls' High School, including the Normal Department and a few hours in each of the weekly "Normals." In each of the schools I visited, I saw something of the work of every grade, except at Fraser, where I divided the time between the first and the eighth grade. My plan was to select a group of several rooms, spend a few minutes in each at

one time, and then return with sufficient frequency to keep up with the work of the grade for several hours. My long experience in visiting and supervision has enabled me of course to judge of the tendency of work in a given room in a very few minutes. **(pp. 3-4)**

Many of the best city schools make free use of stereoscopes, stereopticans and mirrorscopes. Moving pictures are now being established, and will be powerful agencies in promoting interest in history, geography, and literature. I am told that there are a few mirrorscopes in the schools, provided by the teachers themselves. I did not see these, yet I saw a good many history and geography lessons. I think that mirrorscopes and pictures must be the incident and not the rule in your schools. If your teachers have to spend their time making candy and ice cream to sell, and in giving entertainments for the purpose of raising money to buy teaching material, they should not be blamed for ignorance of their subjects and poor teaching. I saw many lessons in your schools, under the name of geography and history, in which children were merely repeating words which they had memorized from the text book without gaining any adequate ideas, but I did not censure the teacher overmuch. She could not afford to buy the illustrated material she needed and she could not teach without it. **(p. 9, emphasis added)**

"Extracurricular" and Personal Views of "Miss Parrish."

An interesting description of Parrish may be seen in "Reminiscences of Miss Parrish" by Glass (1942).

I met Miss Parrish in 1896 when the Gibson girl type – small waists, high pompadours, big hats, and a coquettish manner, was in vogue. She was the first woman I had ever known who seemed absolutely indifferent to curls or straight hair, clothes within sight of the fashion or just clothes. She scorned the stylish figure and was glad that her waist measure was thirty-six inches. A coquettish manner would have been impossible and as unsuitable to her as to Stone Mountain. Yet to a girl still in her teens she easily topped all other women in interest and stimulation.

A lighter view of Parrish held by her students was reflected in the 1906-1907 "School Calendar" of *Levana*, the yearbook of the State Normal School of Georgia. A "noteworthy" day that year was December 6, for it was written that on that day "Miss Parrish comes to chapel on time." Her arrival at chapel was worthy also of two cartoon drawings in the 1908 *Levana*, one for January and another for May. Both cartoons depicted Miss Parrish with the notation "Just arrived at chapel, 9:05 A.M." The 1908 *Levana*, which was the third one overall, was dedicated to her.

A more serious extracurricular view was reflected in a letter Parrish wrote that was published in the February 5, 1911 *Athens Banner (Athens, GA).* Her letter was a response to a report in the Atlanta newspapers which badly misrepresented her speech and ensuing discussions involving other participants at the Georgia Congress of Mothers. The women, including Parrish, had discussed some

shortcomings and dangers of conducting Sunday schools badly, which the reporter had interpreted, apparently, as general criticism and opposition to Sunday school. The following excerpts from Parrish's letter in the *Athens Banner* are illustrative:

I did not speak of music and painting as the reporter said I did. I said...that spiritual development was one thing and sectarian instruction another. I said that the Bible was too valuable an aid to spiritual development to be taught badly and that it should be taught by the best teachers....I said that while the Bible should as a matter of course be used, there were other agencies...and that literature, music, art and a reverent study of nature would also be valuable....I said that I was a good Baptist and should die one, but I did not feel that I had a right to give children the doctrines of my church instead of the larger spiritual culture they ought to have....There were other mistakes in the report of the Atlanta journal....I do not believe that the reporter meant to misrepresent. He simply heard fragments and misunderstood. **(Parrish, 1911, p. 2)**

Apparently, Celestia Parrish died a good Baptist. Her grave is approximately 10 yards from the Clayton Baptist Church sanctuary. Her accomplishments and reputation were such that when she died on September 7, 1918, the Georgia legislature adjourned in Atlanta to attend her funeral 125 miles away in Clayton (Strickland, 1934). Parrish's grave monument bears the epitaph "Georgia's Greatest Woman," a tribute bestowed upon her by Georgia State Superintendent of Schools, M. L. Britain (Glass, 1941). Her grave monument used Celeste, as she was apparently better known, rather than Celestia; unfortunately, both her birth year, 1853, is incorrectly shown as 1854 and her death year, 1918, is incorrectly shown as 1917.

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